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AUTHOR Moore, Rosetta Taylor
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ABSTRACT

A crisis exists in the black family today due to the high unemployment of black men, the high separation rates of parents, the dramatic increase in the number of unwed mothers, and the subsequent heading of nearly one-half of black families by women. There is nothing necessarily wrong with being raised in a home with a single mother. Biographies of 25 famous black Americans and interviews with 25 successful educators, physicians, lawyers, ministers, and politicians who are black showed common experiences which include: (1) a working mother outside the home; (2) black elementary school teachers; (3) extended family and friendly neighbors; (4) belief in education as a way out of poverty; (5) intervention by an important person during adolescence; (6) firm discipline from the mother; (7) nurturing from the grandmother; (8) expectations from mother and teachers that the children would be successful; and (9) job responsibilities in the home from age 8 and a part-time job as a teenager. Strategies are needed to help black single parent families. An androgynous black single parent who is a female head of household and who uses masculine (instrumental) and feminine (expressive) behavior routinely may provide a useful parenting model for black single mothers. Blending these behavior skills increases the chances of heading a functional family. An androgynous mother still needs male allies to intervene when her male children needs them. (ABL)

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Abstract

The Androgynous Black Parent: One Answer to the Single Parent Dilemna

Rosetta Taylor Moore, Ph.D.

The black single parent family headed by a woman has its historical antecedents in the black community; to that community, it has typically been viewed as a functional rather than dysfunctional family system, partially because of the support it received from other systems such as the school, church, and community, and from the extended family which included many relatives as well as grandparents.

In the 1980's, the black single mother does not automatically have the support of the school, church, and the community in which she lives, therefore it is necessary for her to rely more on her own personal resources and strengths. One of those is her tendency, out of necessity, to engage in androgynous behavior; thus the concept of androgyny is supported here as a framework for a parenting model for the black single mother.

The expressive and instrumental skills of the androgynous person are discussed as they relate to human development needs and the developmental cycle of the family.

Also profiled are the common experiences shared by 50 successful Black Americans as they grew up in single parent families headed by women. It is assumed that the Androgynous Black Parent can replicate many of those experiences and increase the functioning of the single family she heads.

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THE ANDROGYNOUS BLACK PARENT:

One Answer to the Single Parent Dilemna

ROSETTA TAYLOR MOORE, PH.D., Student Educational Services Center
Saint Louis University

At this time in history, one would have to be an alien from another planet not to know that there is a crisis in the black family and that the crisis is precipitated by the high unemployment of black men, the high separation and divorce rates between black men and women who are parents, the dramatic increase of unwed mothers in the black community, and the subsequent heading of 48% of black families by women-many of who are in poverty.

Persons who understand that there is nothing inherently wrong about a female headed household and single parenting, will point to the many successful men and women who are products of homes headed by single mothers. They are correct in this assertion; we only have to look at some of our national black public figures and locally at many of our physicians, lawyers, educators, politicians and just plain working class people to know that many offspring of single parent homes can be and are responsible, contributing members to the society.

In reading the biographies of 25 famous Black Americans (18 men 7 women) who were raised in single parent homes and from interviews with 25 successful educators, physicians, lawyers, ministers, and politicians in the St. Louis Metropolitan area, one is able to cite commonalities of experiences among these persons that seem to contribute to their being successful. Some of these common experiences are:

1. A working mother outside the home.
2. Black teachers in elementary school.
3. Extended family that included grandmother, uncles, aunts in the home or in the nearby community.
4. Friendly, helpful neighbors.

5. A belief in education as a way out of poverty.
6. Intervention by a key person (same sex) during adolescence.
7. Firm but fair discipline from mother.
8. Nurturing from grandmother.
9. An expectation from mother and teachers that they would be successful.
10. Part time jobs as teenagers.
11. Job responsibilities in the home from approximately ages 8-17.

Obviously in 1985, some of these people and experiences are not readily visible or do not exist in the same form. For example.... With the integration of schools, many black children may not have all black teachers, but it is likely that they will have some.

Today fifty three percent of black mothers work outside the home, which is comparable to the numbers doing so twenty years ago. While the jobs they hold are still low paying, they are a step up from the domestic worker salaries of earlier decades.

The extended family still occurs with many of the young single mothers who live with their mothers and often grandmothers, but the majority of single mothers head their own households. Neighborliness, because of fear of crime and alienation, and the mobility of neighbors rarely exists, and it is at least debatable that the other experiences occur as they formally did.

However, we can replicate experiences 5-11 more easily than we can 1-4 and that topic will be broached later in the paper. For now, let's return to the problems of the black single parent family headed primarily by women and survey the few possible solutions being cited by lay and professional folk in the Social Sciences.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor (May 1982), there were 61.2 million families across the nation in the first quarter of 1982. 6.6 million or 10.8

percent were black families. They were considerably more likely to have children under 18 than white families-60.7 percent compared with 49.4-and to be maintained by women-41.3 percent compared with 12.32 percent.

Black families in 1982 were more than 3½ times as likely to be living below the poverty level than white families. Especially hard hit were black families maintained by women who had children under age 18. About 6 out of 10 of these families had incomes below the poverty level. Also among women maintaining families, blacks are more likely than whites to have school and pre-school aged children. These black families are considerably larger than the white ones-12.1 percent had 4 or more children in 1981, compared with 5.7 of the white families. The black women maintaining these families are more likely to be younger, never married, and high school dropouts. When employed they are more likely to hold service rather than white collar jobs. (Department of Labor, 1982)

The solutions to the problem number about three. They are:

1. Increase the number of two parent families in the black community.
2. Increase the economic position of the family and of black men and women specifically.
3. Decrease the number of pregnancies among black teenage women.

All three are desirable goals that we should work for, but they are goals that will not be accomplished in the immediate future. Instead, we need strategies and models which will help current black single parent families. The model being proposed here is that of the Androgynous Black Single Parent.

The Androgynous Parent as operationally defined here is that female head of household and single parent who at work and at home uses both instrumental and expressive (referred to traditionally as masculine and feminine) behavior routinely. As defined by Sargent (1983) instrumental behavior refers to the following:

. having a direct competitive achievement style.

- being an analytical problem solver.
- making decisions and judgement calls.
- engaging in proactive-initiating behaviors.
- displaying negotiating skills.

Expressive behavior is defined by Sargent as:

- having a vicarious achievement style.
- using accommodating skills.
- having self knowledge.
- being reactive.
- displaying mediating skills.
- having non verbal sensitivity.
- being nurturing.

Taken together, these are the life skills that are needed in the family as well as in the workplace. These blended skills used by the Androgynous Black Parent increase the chances of her heading a functional family.

It needs to be reinterated here that single parent homes are not inherently dysfunctional units anymore than nuclear families are. In fact to assume the posture that a family is inherently bad because its structure differs from the norm dooms that family to failure. The family is a social system that has several forms-nuclear-extended-single. With any of these forms, it is a threatening posture to define the family as being in trouble or as having a problem. For just as is the case in any system, it is often the behavior around a so called problem which is the problem; (the self fulfilling prophecy at work) so it may be our attitude and behavior toward the family that is problematic (Becvar, Becvar, 1982).

It is the belief of this author that the Androgynous parent can have a functional family if, in addition to using her blended skills, she tries to replicate for her children and herself the experiences of the black successful adults cited

earlier and if she understands human development, and our basic need to successfully complete appropriate developmental tasks at each stage of our growth. If we juxtapose Erik Erikson's (1963) model of human development with Becvars' (1982) developmental cycle of the family, we can see how the needs of the individual and the family evolve. Also depicted under appropriate responses recommended are examples of expressive and instrumental behaviors.

Erikson Individualism HUMAN DEVELOPMENT				Becvar FAMILY DEVELOPMENTAL CYCLE		
STAGE	DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS	ISSUE	APPROPRIATE RESPONSE	STAGE	EMOTIONAL ISSUE	STAGE CRITICAL TASK
Infancy 12/18 months	Basic Trust -vs- Mistrust	Feeding Infant Bonding, Important; Dependence	Nurturing Accepting Dependence Reacting	Childbearing	Accepting new members into system	Taking on parenting roles Making room for grandparents; others
Toddlerhood 18 mos- 3 yrs	Autonomy Shame & Doubt	Toileting Flexibility important here	Alternate between Judgement calls & nurturing. Be proactive, let explore, Provide Safe harbor.	Pre School Child	Accepting the new Personality	Juggling work role w/parenting role; coping w/ lack of privacy Energy drain.
Early Childhood 3-6 years	Initiative -vs- Guilt	Locomoting Needs to initiate explore, imitates	Model behavior you want imitated: Same Sex Role: Model, Allow to initiate; provide peer relationship.	School Age Child	Allowing child to establish relationships outside family.	Extending family system to interact w/society, Encouraging Child's educational achievement Male role Model
Middle Childhood 6-12 years	Industry -vs- Inferiority	School; needs to learn the skills of culture-work Self Esteem	Model achieving behavior, display negotiating mediating skills; Give child responsibilities. Reward achievement.	Teenage Child	Increasing flexibility of family boundaries to allow independence	Shifting parent child relationship to balance freedom w/limits. Refocus on own career goals.
Adolescence 12-18 years	Identity -vs- Role Confusion	Peer Relationship Searching for Self Values	Allow same sex role to intervene: use mediating; show nonverbal sensitivity.	Launching Center	Accepting child's exit	Releasing adult into work, college, marriage. Maintaining Supportive home base
Young Adulthood	Intimacy -vs- Isolation	Love Relationship Fusing Identity with other	Be there; be a good listener			

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The model depicted here is a simplified version of the kind of responses the Androgynous parent can use to help children successfully complete their developmental tasks. It also shows the emotional issues and critical tasks that the parent can expect as the family develops. While none of the issues are easy to respond to, being able to anticipate them will give the parent time to plan and prepare. It will also help her to know what roles must be filled by other family members or friends. For example, if the father of the child is not available at crucial times, a responsible male friend or a relative can fit the appropriate role. Also enlisting the help of a respected male teacher as a temporary role model is a good alternative.

The encouraging thing about the model is that the Androgynous person can carry out most of these tasks without role strain. Indeed many black mothers have been doing so since slavery. We have only to read black women's history--When and Where I Enter (Giddings, 1984); Black Women in White America (Lerner, 1972); Tomorrow's Tomorrow (Ladner, 1971); The Strengths of Black Families (Hill, 1972); Black Women in Nineteenth Century American Life (Loewenberg, Boggin, 1976); The Black Family (Staples, 1971); to know that these women have used instrumental and expressive behaviors out of necessity not only in the home and workplace, but also in the larger society where they have a history of activism which dates back to women like Sojourner Truth and Ida Barnett Wells who led the fight against the lynching of black men in the postbellum south.

Early in the paper, it was mentioned that certain successful black people shared common positive experiences in their single parent homes that could be replicated in contemporary black single parent homes. Those experiences were:

1. having a belief in education as a way out of poverty.
2. intervention by a key person of the same sex during adolescence years.
3. firm but fair discipline from the mother.

4. nurturing from grandmother.

5. an expectation from mother and teachers that the children would be successful.

6. part time jobs as teenagers.

7. job responsibilities in the home from approximately ages 8-17.

Traditionally, the black family has looked to the school system to develop within their children the kind of communication and analytical skills that would allow these children access to job training or higher education and subsequent economic and social mobility. This can be a reality again, but the black parent must be an active participant in this process which means she must work with the school and see that her child is motivated to take advantage of the opportunities that are there. This means knowing the child's teacher, attending parent-teacher conferences, encouraging the child to turn off the television and do homework assignments as well as discussing school with the child on a daily basis. Having books in the home and taking the child to the library often is another way the parent can communicate the value of education to the child.

It is crucial that the androgynous parent have male allies who can intervene in the family when her male son needs him. This can be a teacher or a male relative or friend who is a good role model. There are many black men willing to play this crucial role. Some formal organizations that do this routinely are the black fraternities and big brother organizations.

Being firm and fair should be relatively easy for the androgynous person because they use these behaviors consistently in the workplace as well as in their interactions with peers. They see men and women, boys and girls, as equals who are capable of accepting boundaries as well as responsibilities for their actions. They do not use corporal punishment as a means of getting the child to show desired and appropriate behavior; they reward this behavior and model it routinely.

Even when the grandmother is not in the home, the single parent can benefit by including her in the life of the family. This can be done by regularly including the grandmother in visits and outings as well as by utilizing her "babysitting" skills, and by benefitting from her wisdom. If the biological grandparent is not available, there are many surrogates who can take her place.

The androgynous parent should find it easy to convey to the child her expectation that the child will be successful. They can do this by giving the child tasks to accomplish that are commensurate with his/her development. They can also encourage the child's teacher to have positive expectations of the child by being in regular contact with the teacher and letting that teacher know how the parent values education and the teacher's input.

Although it is difficult for teenagers to find jobs, if they have been taught to be competent in their homes, through a strong work ethic, they will increase their chances of getting and keeping a job as teenagers. Giving the child meaningful job responsibilities in the home from ages 8-17 will help them to develop their competence and confidence. It is important that these jobs be important to the family, appropriate for the child, and rewarded through praise and through some other mode important to the child.

All of the above experiences can be accomplished, particularly by the androgynous parent who can model easily the behaviors necessary to provide the experiences. Most importantly, this parent is likely to feel good about herself and confident of her abilities. She will know the importance of role modeling and expressive behaviors for her boys and girls so that they can increase their chances of being effectively functioning human beings.

Over the past few years, this author has interviewed several single mothers who fit the androgynous definition. One of them, Elizabeth Newton, a secretary at a major university, shared her views on single parenting. "The problem of the single parent home is not unsolvable if the parent and child have a mutual love, understanding good communication, trust, and goals the family can accomplish. It is crucial

that the mother provide a climate of openness so that the child feels comfortable about sharing his or her feelings and thoughts with the mother. It is also important for the mother to have a strong value system which encourages the child to do his best work, and to respect himself and others."

The single parent also needs to respect the child; this can be done by being honest and direct with the child, by asking his views and letting him take part in some of the decision making that goes on in the family and by helping the child to assume some responsibility in the home as well as in his schooling.

The androgynous single parent should have no difficulty doing the above because she positively models caring as well as decision making skills. She can have that funtional family defined by Vincent Foley (1984) as the one in which the needs of all the members are met. It has been further defined by Becvar & Becvar (1982) as "that subsystem that evolves relative to both external and internal pressures, and that has an interpretative system which anticipates and accommodates change at the appropriate times and in the appropriate amounts." The androgynous single parent has a repertoire of behaviors that cannot only respond to the need for change, but allow her and the children in the family to be comfortable with the change.

There will be many who will argue that the ideal family is headed by two parents; yet we know that many of the so called nuclear families are in trouble; we cannot always decide on the structure of the family, but we can decide what experiences children have in single, nuclear, or extended family. All parents will agree that they want the very best for their children and maximize their chances of being fully functioning human beings.

In summary, Savannah Miller Young, an educator in the St. Louis public schools shares her view of how parents can help their children be all they can be. She says: "Children should be: "talked to-not at, allowed to be creative-not hushed and shushed. Loved a lot--scolded a little, encouraged to explore and explain, not to sit quietly.

Told often that they are Smart, Sweet, Logical, Beautiful, Intelligent, Competent, and Great and Fun to be with!"

For lack of a better description, the adjectives describe an androgynous child, one for example, who is able to do Mathematics and English equally well in school, and who is able to cry and laugh when he/she feels like it without fear of ridicule. By all accounts, androgynous people are able to live their lives more fully. (Sargent, 1983; McGregor, 1960; Jardin, Henning, 1977;). The androgynous single parent can accomplish this too, not only for herself but for her offspring.

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